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By ERIK LARSEN

TOMS RIVER BUREAU

There are more veterans living in Ocean County than any other county in New Jersey and more veterans in Ocean County over the age of 65 than any county in the United States.

With the global economic crisis having devastated 401Ks and other investments, and the unemployment rate above 10 percent, more veterans are relying on the benefits promised to them for their military service as a lifeboat in these hard times.

Rep. John Adler, D-N.J., whose 3rd Congressional District includes much of Ocean County, gets about six calls at his offices each week from vets mired in a backlog of claims nationwide and bureaucratic red tape at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

A few months back, Anthony Orlando, a Vietnam War veteran from Stafford, was one of those constituents who called Adler for help. In 2005, his wife, Lynn, had convinced her husband to contact the VA to see if he could begin drawing benefits.

A diabetic with a variety of other medical problems aggravated by his time as a soldier, Orlando was eligible for "entitlements and benefits for service connected conditions," which resulted in him receiving a monthly check, starting June 2005, for about \$1,064.

In July 2007, unbeknownst to Orlando, the VA declared him 100 percent disabled, which meant he could start receiving more money. However, VA officials did not inform Orlando until May of this year, in a letter.

When Orlando and his wife attempted to find out when his benefits would be adjusted to reflect his corrected status, and whether he had coming a retroactive windfall in back disability payments, a VA representative at a call-in center could find no record such a letter had ever been sent, the couple said.

So they contacted their congressman.

"(With the VA) You don't talk, you listen . . . Every time I called, I got a different answer," Anthony Orlando said. "Congressman Adler got me the money."

Adler and his staff saw to it that Orlando's monthly check was increased to \$2,823, and also got him a \$102,008 retroactive disability payment, deposited in one lump sum directly into Orlando's bank account.

"Well, the first thing I did was, I went out and bought myself a Corvette," Orlando said. A white, used 2007 Chevrolet Corvette.

Not a new one, his wife interjected. "No, he's not spending all the money on a (new) Corvette," she said flatly.

John P. Dorrity, director of the Ocean County Veterans Service Bureau in Toms River, said there are 1.2 million veterans nationwide with unanswered benefit claims or stuck in some endless appeals process, including himself, he pointed out.

"My claim has been in the hopper for seven years," Dorrity said. "It's a service-connected disability."

Dorrity said of the estimated 68,000 veterans living in Ocean County alone, between 3,500 and 4,500 have backlogged claims with the VA.

"What you guys outside of the military don't understand is that there's three agencies when you come out of the (Secretary of Veterans Affairs') office. There's the VBA, Veterans Benefits Administration. There's VHA, Veterans Health Administration," and they don't talk to each other, he lamented.

The third agency is the National Cemetery Administration, Dorrity quipped. "They do the best job . . . usually within two weeks of our deaths, hopefully."

In October, Dorrity traveled to Washington to meet with Emily Smith, deputy assistant secretary for intergovernmental affairs at the VA. He also had meetings with Sens. Russ Feingold, D-Wis., and Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, all to discuss the backlog in veterans' claims.

While everyone seemed earnest in their desire to improve the VA and do better for the veterans, he said he did not leave the nation's capital feeling overly optimistic.

"I'll tell you the truth, this is my impression and like I said, I've only been doing this 30 years, I could be wrong, but I don't see any great movement to reduce the backlog. It is getting worse. . ." Dorrity said.

In the spring, the number of backlogged claims for benefits nationwide was about 860,000. After a new G.I. bill went into effect over the summer, the number of education claims and appeals increased the size of the backlog by one-third, to about 1.2 million this fall, Dorrity said.

Jim Blue, regional director for the Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs at the Department of Veterans Affairs, said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki takes very seriously the obligation of the agency to veterans and their families.

"VA is diligently working on new and innovative ways to improve the process to ensure that claims are decided in an expeditious, accurate and timely manner," Blue said.

Just before Thanksgiving, at a pancake breakfast Adler hosted for constituents at a firehouse in Stafford, Orlando came to thank his congressman in person. But Adler had one more surprise for Orlando: a folded U.S. flag and a small certificate thanking him for his service.

"I'm hoping that by presenting this flag, which has flown over the Capitol, you realize how grateful our nation is to you, and the men and women like you who served our country," Adler said, as Orlando appeared to hold back tears. "Your service to our country some years ago helped keep us safe and free, thank you very much for that."